Northumbria Research Link

Guest Editor Introduction

Experiences of Women Leaders in Alternative Sites of Organization

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Structured Abstract - *Experiences of Women Leaders in Alternative Sites of Organization*

Purpose (mandatory): The editorial introduces the special issue on the experiences of women leaders in alternative sites of organization.

Design/methodology/approach (mandatory): The first section is a discussion on the key issues in the study of women leaders in alternative sites of organization. The second section presents the papers in the special issue.

Findings (mandatory): All three papers fall within the interpretative tradition and unpick the *lived experiences* of women / leaders in the workplace. All three papers, whether directly or indirectly, speak to the struggles of identity construction for women: what it is to be a women / leader / butch lesbian in the workplace. Two of the papers explore women leaders' experiences in the public sector and draw attention to the relational co-constructed nature of leadership. These two papers illuminate how the practice of leadership is complex and women leaders reflexively negotiate the tensions they face both by defying and acquiescing within gendered contexts. The third paper explores the tensions faced by lesbian women at their entry point into an organization – the employment interview – and their struggle for authenticity as they negotiate acceptable "trade-offs" in constructing a favourable sense of self.

Research limitations/implications (if applicable):

Practical implications (if applicable): All papers in this special issue surface how the complexity surrounding what it means to be a woman / leader in contemporary organizations is often shared, yet invisible. Moreover, the empirical data reveals that gender binaries still constrain women/leaders in alternative sites of organizing but at the same time they challenge these binaries through reflexive and relational practices.

Social implications (if applicable)

Originality/value (mandatory): *Gender in Management: An International Journal* invited this special issue to value studies of women leaders in alternative sites of organization, recognizing that women leaders are found not just in mainstream, corporate, for profit formal organizations. As a result we consider their experiences alongside the extant research base of women managers and leaders.

Key Words: alternative organizing, doing gender differently, doing gender well, identity construction, lesbian gay and bisexual identity, public sector leadership, women leadership

Paper Type: Research Paper

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Introduction

Gender in Management: An International Journal has regularly published research studies examining

gender and leadership (see Alimo-Metcalfe, 2010a,b; Galanaki *et al.,* 2009; Sheaffer *et al.,* 2011) and the

experiences of women leaders in mainstream organizations and recognized managerial hierarchies (see

Powell *et al.,* 2008; Simpson *et al.,* 2010; Vinnicombe, 2011). The journal has also been inclusive to gender

and leadership issues in SMEs and family owned organizations (e.g. Hodges, 2012; Patterson *et al.,* 2012)

and in higher education (e.g. Yáñez and Moreno, 2008). However, the aim of this special issue is to bring

together and value studies of women leaders in *alternative sites* of organizations, recognizing that women

leaders are found, not just in mainstream, corporate, for profit formal organizations, and also to consider

learning from women's experiences of alternative sites to inform our future *Gender in Management* research

agendas.

The backdrop for the special issue is the number of women in the UK's top positions of power –

women leaders in positions of influence. If women were to achieve equal representation among Britain's

26,000 top positions of power, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2010) estimates that 5,400

"missing" women would rise through the ranks to positions of real influence. The Commission's report,

"Sex and Power in the UK" (2010) details that it will take 70 years to achieve an equal number of women

directors in the FTSE 100; 45 years to achieve an equal number of women in the senior judiciary; 14

elections, or up to 70 years, to achieve an equal number of women MPs and 30 years to achieve an equal

number of women senior police officers. However, men continue to be favoured in leadership roles (Powell,

2012) despite efforts to address low representation (Sealy *et al.,* 2009, 2011; Singh *et al.,* 2008). This

context re-emphasises the need for *Gender in Management* researchers to continue endeavours in

understanding women's experiences in management and leadership and to illuminate continued gender

stereotyping in organizations with the aim of unsettling and challenging the gender binaries which sustain

this stereotyping. An area which is ripe for exploration is leadership and the leader role, where women have the potential to create alternatives to established gendered norms.

Gender-stereotyping in organizations and society remains a persistent barrier (Singh and Vinnicombe, 2004), surfaced explicitly in UK society by the way women leaders are scrutinized by the press and media for their bodies, dress, impression management, family relationships and the issue of work-life balance, rather than their performance as leaders. In challenging this explicit gendering of women leaders, the BBC's "Woman's Hour" radio programme has compiled a "Power List" to rank the 100 most powerful women in the UK at the start of 2013, identifying which women have the biggest impact on our economy, society, politics and culture to profile the achievements of British women across public life. In parallel the BBC is also leading a campaign to identify women experts who can engage with the media to ensure women's voices in the UK are heard during significant debates in UK society. These interventions are key to changing the profile of women leaders and challenging the gendered stereotypes which are apparent in our everyday lives.

From a *Gender in Management* research perspective the evaluation of women leaders' masculine and feminine characteristics against those "expected" stereotyped masculinities and femininities required to sustain a senior leader position is currently up for critique. As part of this critique we have recently argued (Mavin and Grandy, 2011; 2012) that individuals can "do gender well" and "differently" by simultaneously performing alternative expressions of femininity or masculinity (see also Kelan, 2010; Messerschmidt, 2009; West and Zimmerman, 2009). In performing masculinities and femininities simultaneously, individuals can disrupt and unsettle gender binaries (and gender stereotypes). This in turn opens up space for women to be "otherwise" in organizations and in leader roles. We acknowledge gender as a fluid concept which shifts over time and place and that established gender binaries are beginning to flex and stretch so that women do now associate themselves with senior positions (Billing, 2011). One aim of this special issue is to explore how gender binaries and established views of leadership can be unsettled by extending research into women's experiences in alternative sites.

In developing this special issue, we have chosen three excellent papers as an introduction to the subject of women leaders/leadership in alternative sites. The issue explores women's experiences in alternative organizational sites to offer new insights to the leader role and to leadership. An alternative organizational site is understood here as one that does not "fit" or align with conventional, mainstream or traditional notions of organizing, primarily in a business context. The dominant discourse in Western society has been to focus upon formal, multinational, hierarchical, corporate structures or entrepreneurial firms with a profit motivation. In this sense, organization equals "business" and what has been under researched and/or under-valued in terms of research are alternative organizational sites. These sites are not necessarily new forms of organizing. They invade our everyday existence but are overlooked as sites for studies of organization, management and leadership. The three papers we have chosen to include have constructed their alternative site in the following ways: Liz Matykiewicz and Robert McMurray present the *Modern Matron* as a "site" for leadership; Ian Robson offers us UK Early Years Services as a "site" for women's leadership and Helen Woodruffe-Burton and Sam Bairstow focus on lesbian women an "alternative site", in and of itself.

The three papers cohere around a research agenda which prioritises the exploration of individual subjective, co-constructed and gendered experiences of leadership, constructed within social relations which take place amidst dynamic interplays of multiple discourses. Each paper is positioned as searching for alternative understandings to the "malestream" in terms of understandings of leadership and organizing. The research presented considers how individual experiences of relational leadership in alternative sites are set against "traditional", "accepted" gendered frames of leadership and organizing and highlights the consequences for individual identity, self and understandings of leadership. In different ways, the papers surface performances of gender within leadership contexts which highlight a doing of gender well and differently (Mavin and Grandy, 2011; 2012) and therefore a doing of gender which flexes, challenges and/or unsettles established gender binaries.

The first paper "Modern Matron: A "Site" for Leadership" by Liz Matykiewicz and Robert McMurray considers the ways in which certain occupational, organizational and political positions become

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active sites of leadership construction. Liz and Robert identify the introduction of the *Modern* Matron in the

English National Health Service (NHS) as their site for leadership and consider how new forms of gender

transcending leadership are constituted relationally through a dynamic interplay of historical, nostalgic,

social, political and organizational forces. Here the *Modern* Matron presents as a site for relational

leadership in respect of both self and other and it is argued that the construction of *Modern* Matron usefully

points to the ways in which multiple discourses, practices and relations may be intertwined in defining what

it is to lead in contemporary organizations. The paper offer us the opportunity to consider the lived

experiences of women leaders in traditionally gendered yet alternative organizational settings and highlights

the extent to which leadership is an on-going relational co-construction based within a context of the

interplay of four factors: nostalgic authority, visibility, praxis and order negotiation which together produce

a mode of leading that is neither heroic nor popularist. Liz and Robert argue for a more modest relational

approach that nurtures and allows space for the development and practice of others – a more self-effacing

leading that works and provides empirical research to illustrate how Powell's (2012) relational leadership

which transcends "gender" may actually occur.

The second paper, "Women's Leadership as Narrative Practice: Identifying 'Tent Making', 'Dancing'

and Orchestrating' in UK Early Years Services" by Ian Robson, offers insights into narrative practices of

women leading which make visible an alternative form (to the dominant leadership culture in the sector) of

women's leadership that is highly relational, ethical, responsive and capable of dealing with complexity. Ian

argues that women's accounts of leadership in this site are still in stark contrast to many of the "masculine"

forms of leadership cultures in which these women operate. Ian draws upon philosopher Ricoeur (1984) to

produce narratives that "say" something about the social contexts in which they were shaped and utilises

innovative methods to engage women in sharing their narrative practices of leadership. The resultant themes

of leadership reflect some aspects of "postheroic" leadership but avoid stereotypical feminine associations of

powerlessness and selfless giving. Women's leadership in this site is collaborative and recognises others

whilst also being purposeful, assertive and agentic. We interpret this as doing gender well and differently

simultaneously in leadership (Mavin and Grandy, 2011; 2012). Importantly, the women's narrative practices of leadership within this site have the potential to be a source of leadership innovation.

In the third paper, "Countering Heteronormativity: Exploring the Negotiation of Butch Lesbian Identity"*,* Helen Woodruffe-Burton and Sam Bairstow argue that there is a lack of research into sexual orientation issues in the workplace, specifically into lesbian, gay and bisexual identity as an invisible diversity, where women lesbians play organizational "celibates", particularly at the point of entry into organizations. The focus on lesbian women is the alternative site, in and of itself, through which possibilities for women's leadership can be explored. Helen and Sam build on the work of Gedro (2010) to argue that leadership is yet the domain of those in the sexual minority and the embodiment of leadership remains under explored. Helen and Sam analyse on-line data drawn from a discussion forum entitled "my interview dilemma!" which concerns presenting one's self when attending a job interview. They examine the negotiation (struggle) of living the Butch identity. Helen and Sam identify parallels between lesbian women's experiences within heteronormativity and gendered experiences within masculine leader normativity.

Both Liz Matykiewicz and Robert McMurray and Ian Robson's research into alternative sites of leadership add empirical weight to the theoretical contention that the binary divide that threatens to constrain and restrict how women do gender in organizations and as leaders, can be disrupted and unsettled (Billing, 2011; Kelan, 2010; Mavin and Grandy, 2011; Messerschmidt, 2009; West and Zimmerman, 2009). Helen Woodruffe-Burton and Sam Bairstow's study of butch lesbians' self-presentation in organizations provides an empirical contribution to the under-researched area of women's embodiment as leaders. How women leaders' bodies and appearance are evaluated against gender-sex binaries and sex-role stereotypes, by both men and women in organizations and in society by the media (for example, see the vilifying of Professor Mary Beard on social media in January-February 2013), is a current controversial area, ripe for research and challenges in practice. Significantly, the three contributions offer avenues for future *Gender in Management* and leadership research which considers alternative gender performances of leadership.

In offering this special issue, the authors have highlighted women's experiences within alternative sites and focused upon the development of alternative leadership. The papers offer learning from alternative sites for *Gender in Management* research agendas and in doing so, offer empirical research to highlight how gender binaries are being challenged, stretched, flexed or unsettled in practice. This unsettling, we argue is a key lever to women's further progress in leader positions and in organizations.

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